

13

WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

Paré (2010:40) relates a story of a student who sees the postgraduate journey as being on a bus and says, “I’m not quite sure yet where it’s going. The scary part is that I am the one driving the bus.” I, on the other hand, as a mature student who returned to an academic pursuit after many years, saw my postgraduate journey as far more arduous than a bus trip. I felt as if I had to summit a mountain, the peak of which remained shrouded. Every inch of my climb produced further challenges (not to mention the heady rush of vertigo I experienced most of the time). Sometimes, I had to retrace my steps to find a safer, easier way to keep up the momentum. At other times, I was ready to admit that I was no mountaineer and that I had taken on the impossible. What I found to be the most difficult was to get started; to settle down and write. Something kept blocking me. It did not mean that I had not read sufficiently, that my data was inadequate, or that I did not know what I wanted to say; I simply found starting to write challenging. There is a great deal of advice available to people who have writer’s block. “Just start writing”, people say cheerfully, “and it will all come to you”. Others advised, “Write early and write often” (Lee & Aitchison 2009:94). The problem is that it is only once you have found your way on the mountain, which you eventually do, that this advice makes sense to you.

The reason why students may find writing difficult at first is because they realise that they are not only writing about some subject matter which they feel knowledgeable about, but that they are communicating something about themselves. Private thinking becomes public when it is written down (Aitchison 2010). The writer therefore has to think carefully and deliberately about ideas before committing them to paper. Paré (2010:32) contends that writing is not merely a means of expression but a type of learning and “thinking made tangible”.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Academic writing does not mean that you can automatically remove the person you are from your writing and replace it with the new scholarly you. To be able to write like a scholar when you are still learning to be one is very difficult. You need an insider's knowledge to become a member of the academic discourse community. To be able to write well, you need to know what is meant by "well structured" and that your arguments are "well supported". At the same time, you need to find your own, authentic voice. The term "voice" as used by Bakhtin does not refer only to an "auditory signal", but includes the notion that "human communicative practices give rise to mental functioning in the individual" (Wertsch 1981:13). Students often feel intimidated by these expectations and even experience an identity crisis, as they feel that they have to become someone they are not, or that they simply do not fit in (Ivanič 1998). In the following sections, three identities of the writerly self, as identified by Ivanič (1998), will be explored and located using my own experience.

THREE IDENTITIES OF THE WRITERLY SELF

Ivanič (1998) suggests that writing can be seen as a site of struggle in which the writer negotiates three types of writer identity: an "autobiographical self", a "discoursal self" and the "self as author". These three identities are generally chronological but interrelate with one another. All three identities negotiate socially available possibilities for, what Ivanič (1998:23) calls, "self-hood". People's identities (or selfhoods, to use Ivanič's term) "are affected if not determined by the discourses and social practices in which they participate" (Ivanič 1998:10). Identity is thus socially constructed and not left to individual choice. Identity is a "complex of interweaving positionings" (Ivanič 1998:10).

Boud and Lee (2009) point out that doctoral education is a form of social practice that is shaped by the broader economic, political and intellectual agendas which shape knowledge production and exchange. All the activities involved with doctoral studies are thus forms of social practice which are shaped by the same influences. Writing is an activity of doctoral work. There has been a shift from seeing language (and by implication writing) as an independent skill, divorced from social and cultural practice. If language can be influenced by its social and cultural context, the construction of language must be recognised as being complex and heterogeneous (Ivanič 1998; Aichison 2009; Boud & Lee 2009). The ability to master academic writing goes beyond knowledge of one's subject or discipline and includes an understanding of what examiners will be looking for, what discourse is taking place in that discipline and to what extent you have mastered what is expected of you. It is in this realm of expectation that you realise that academic writing is not without elements of power and authority, neither of which is yours as a student.

CHAPTER 13 • WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

The “autobiographical self”

The first identity to be brought to the act of writing referred to above is the “autobiographical self”. This means that writers bring their experiences from their life-history, their encounters with people, their interests, ideas, opinions and commitments to their writing. Experiences are a dimension of who you are; your consciousness. You are not a neutral writer writing objectively about your research. You bring a variety of values and beliefs to your writing, as well as a range of literary practices learned throughout your life. You have a “multiple social identity”, but in the course of your studies, you have to become a member of the academic discourse community (Ivanič 1998:1). You need to become familiar with institutional and disciplinary writing conventions and develop an appropriate voice while learning to adopt an authoritative stance in your writing (Cotterall 2011).

Identities are also defined by their historical context. The way people think and behave change over time. Today, people are far more comfortable speaking and writing about topics that were regarded as controversial fifty years ago. This means that your identity constantly has to be redefined and changed to keep up with time. Your identity is thus located in events and experiences that you interpret as you move through time. Ivanič (1998) suggests that there is a three-way interplay between the writers’ life-experiences, their sense of self and the reality that they construct through their writing. There is thus a connection between the writer’s biographical narratives and his or her writing. There are also critical events in your life that redefine your identity, such as becoming a parent. All these moments “foreground” change in identity (Ivanič 1998:16). Mature students, like me, often embark on their postgraduate studies after an interruption which most probably means that academic writing does not come naturally at first. Learning to write well is often a matter of observation, trial and error (Lee & Aitchison 2009). All students must learn the many traditions, expectations and unspoken rules of the academic world. Ivanič (1998) notes that mature students entering the academic world after some time away from it struggle with conflicts of identity since they feel strange in their new environment and lack confidence in this unfamiliar world. Students also enter the academic world with a wealth of personal experience which may mean that they have multiple and conflicting identities.

As a result of my earlier postgraduate studies in Critical Linguistics, as well as the nature of my work, I wrote a great deal and regarded myself as a competent writer. However, I soon realised that a large amount of my writing, albeit grammatically correct, was emotive and had been based largely on my opinion. Having my own opinion was not wrong, but I quickly learned that it had to be grounded. I had to

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

learn to see things through other lenses. In order to speak with authority, I had to borrow someone else's voice before I knew what I was doing. My autobiographical writing self also brought with it many entrenched habits. I had to rid myself of the habit of modifying most of my adjectives with adverbs of degree, especially where I felt strongly about a topic, for example by using words such as "extremely", "exceptionally", "huge", "very" and many others. The use of these words might add colour to descriptions, but it breaks one of the ground rules of academic writing, namely writing objectively and neutrally. I also had a tendency to start my sentences with pronouns which were vague in locating their antecedents, such as words like "this" and "it", without qualifying what these words referred to in the previous sentence.

It is also valuable to remember who your reader(s) are. Your identity includes how you relate to others. It is important in doctoral studies to learn how to write for specific audiences (Murray 2010). Postgraduate students know that they are not writing for a single person but their audience consists of a supervisor or two, as well as their eventual examiners. The readers, too, have different interests and knowledge, and form opinions of the writer as they read, trying to find the writer's identity in the writing. Identity is evident in the choice of words that are used, the sentence structure and the syntax. There is thus a complex relationship between the writer and his or her identity, and the readers. Mature students often feel that they have to change their identity to fit in with or accommodate the dominant values and practices of their institutions (Ivanič 1998). Writers can decide to accommodate or resist conforming to readers' expectations, but Thesen (2014) points out that where writers are unable to make sense of their intended audiences the notion of voice can also be silenced or erased. As a mature student I therefore needed to learn how to capitalise on my autobiographical self, but also move beyond it in order to engage my readers.

The "discoursal self"

The second identity that a writer develops is called the "discourse identity". Ivanič (1998:17) defines "discourse" as "the mediating mechanism in the social construction of identity". This can take place through speaking or writing. Discourse is the site where identity is manifested. Discourse provides the framework for thinking about identity. In writing a thesis or dissertation, the writer develops his or her "discoursal self". The writer thus constructs this identity through writing.

A writer's "discoursal self" is the impression that writers create of themselves through the discourse choices they make as they write or speak; the way in which they align themselves with "socially available subject positions" (Ivanič 1998:32). This is done

CHAPTER 13 • WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

either consciously or unconsciously. The position we hold in society, our ethnicity, gender and what we can or cannot do are indicators of who we are. Ivanič (1998) states that writing is an act of identity, as well as a form of discourse. The way we write is a result of the way we are.

The characteristics of the discursive self are created by the values, beliefs or power relations in the social context in which they are written. In the discipline or field of the writer, there are special conventions of writing. The discursive self tries to adopt these conventions and to fit into this environment as much as possible, adapting it to the specific genre which constitutes the purpose of writing, such as writing a thesis or dissertation, writing a paper for a conference, or writing an article for publication. Discursive selves can thus change as people engage in different discourses. Writers' identities can differ considerably depending on the demands made by the occasion for which they write. Ivanič (1998) maintains that while it is sometimes difficult to find traces of a writer's autobiographical identity in academic writing, the only real evidence of an author's identity can be found in the writer's discursive self. According to Ivanič (1998:18) the self cannot be "studied in isolation but as something that manifests itself in discourse".

Murray (2010) mentions that in early doctoral writing, the critique of others' work is overstated in literature reviews. Ivanič (1998) also notes that in the early stages of discursive identity, students are apt to imitate or depend upon the ideas contained in their readings, often without citing their sources or failing to use their own words when paraphrasing. They often fail to mark these statements with quotation marks, indicating their source. They also incorporate many of the ideas that they read about into their own thinking processes so that the lines between their ideas and those of other sources become blurred. The student writers' "own" discourse often consists of a conglomeration of discourses with which they are familiar and which they have adopted in the absence of having a voice of their own. The way in which writers use these other discourses establishes a discourse identity of their own. However, Ivanič (1998) points out that there is a fine line between intertextuality and plagiarism. She also points out that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a novice writer trying to establish a discursive self and plagiarism. The dilemma students face is that all the ideas and words they encounter come from what they read. They admire the way some writers write and, in trying to emulate them to become part of the discourse, they are in danger of copying writers verbatim instead of signalling when they use other people's voices by using quotation marks or by means of attributing an idea to another author.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

My discorsal self branded me as someone who took far too long to make my point. Reading widely comforted me. The more I read, the more knowledge I built up about the subject. This left me with a large amount of information that had to be assimilated, synthesised or discarded. In the early stages of my studies, I had not developed the self-discipline to select the information that I needed for my argument without wanting to include at least something from all my sources. Trimming a chapter down to what was regarded as acceptable by my supervisors remained a challenge. I developed a ruthless attitude in my writing and deleted pages of it. This was a painful but necessary process. My long-windedness could partially have been attributed to my tendency to paraphrase other writers' writing and, instead of synthesising their ideas, I retained their discorsal voices instead of developing my own.

Ivanič (1998:28) points out that there is not a range of possibilities to writers in constructing their "discorsal self", as it depends on the "possibilities of self-hood supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they are writing". Thus, "negotiating a 'discorsal self' is an integral part of the writing process: there is no such thing as 'impersonal writing'" (Ivanič 1998:32).

Cooper (2014) points out that there is little research on the role that experiential learning plays to enrich academic practices. Yet when many mature students return to an institution to take up their studies, they bring a wealth of experience with them – not only from their personal lives, but also from their working lives. The dilemma is: to what extent can prior knowledge be referred to or incorporated into research writing since the truth value accorded to this type of writing cannot be the same as that found in formal knowledge. The solution to this quandary has many implications for mature students acquiring acceptable writing conventions.

One of these implications is that scientific knowledge traditionally belongs to a western (or northern), metropolitan and masculine knowledge practice¹. Different social and cultural groups' autobiographical selves vary considerably. The autobiographical self influences the discorsal self. An African worldview, for example, is different. Conceptions of knowledge in the African context are based upon cooperation and collective responsibility, corporateness and interdependence (as opposed to competition, individual rights, separateness and independence) (Cadmon 2014). In other words, the well-being of others and striving towards a common good rather

1 Also see Chapter 2 and Chapter 12 in this book that both speak to how African knowledge systems often get subverted to a westernised epistemic point of view. Chapter 12 in particular addresses some of these issues by highlighting the possible tension African students might experience when working across these knowledge systems.

CHAPTER 13 • WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

than that of the individual are of primary importance. This is known as Ubuntu: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. Any form of knowledge other than the traditional form of knowledge tends to be lost or discarded. Cadmon (2014) argues that the power relations that are underpinned by Eurocentric discourse should be challenged. Internationalism has meant that universities have become multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. These students do not always have the traditional or “accepted” knowledge perspective and struggle to find their academic voice in research conversations as their experiential knowledge forms a barrier. Academic writing consists of a set of practices, but these practices are socially constructed and so may be contested and challenged.

Deyi (2014) points out that in her writing, she needed to use more proverbs and idioms because in isiXhosa, writers or speakers never make their point in the beginning but first present many examples and use many synonyms to explain an issue. African languages have a natural rhythm and if the text has to be cut, this breaks the rhythm. This type of academic writing in the western world would be regarded as repetitious since the language should be used as a vehicle and not as an end in itself. While writing her thesis, Deyi (2014) felt that by confining the thesis to the writing standards imposed by convention created a distance between her and the research, and filled her with a sense of loss. This loss was as a result of the feeling that the postgraduate thesis did not belong to her but was determined by the intended audience, the external examiner and other possible readers. It would also be difficult for the writer to find his or her own voice, the voice of authority, under these circumstances.

The “authorial self”

When the writer finds his or her own “voice”, the writer becomes “self as author”. This is the third of Ivanič’s (1998) writer identities towards which every student strives. According to Ivanič (1998), this aspect of writer identity is concerned with the writer’s beliefs, the position the writer takes and the opinion the writer holds. It is a different sense of voice to that of the discursal self. It is less tentative, less searching and more confident. This is when writers can claim authority in the content of what they are writing and establish an authorial presence in their writing. They can take responsibility for their authorship. This does not always happen as some writers credit all their work to the ideas of others, thereby hiding their identities. Ivanič (1998) maintains that the “authorial self” is a product of the autobiographical self and to write with authority is an aspect of the discursal self. Although this identity is not separate from the other two identities, it is distinctly different.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The process of developing the self as author is complex as it works on many levels. Murray (2010:102) points out that becoming authorial involves “learning about the structures of written academic argument, developing a sense of audience requirements, increasing their understanding of how to construct the case for ‘contribution’ to the field, gaining insights into the politics of academic writing and developing confidence and resilience to dealing with critique”. Murray adds that this process involves students moving to a position where they can see their field as a debate and how they can position themselves in that debate.

Even though it might be widely acknowledged that writing plays a focal role in academia, relatively little is known about the development of writing practices in doctoral writing (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross & Burgin 2012; Ferguson 2009; Kamler & Thomson 2008; Cotterall 2011). Many students struggle to find their authorial voice which causes them a great deal of anxiety and distress. Traditionally, the supervisor/student dyad remains “the primary location for learning” (Lee & Aitchison 2009:94). This finding is supported by Aitchison *et al* (2012). Chihota and Thesen (2014:132) suggest that however good the student/supervisor relationship is, “there are inevitably times of isolation and confusion, with emotions of loss, blame and frustration”. Lee and Aitchison (2009) point out that some supervisors are not properly equipped to deal with their students’ linguistic needs. There are other ways in which students can hone their writing skills and discover their writer identities, for example by attending writing workshops or consulting self-help books. Even though students need support and guidance, Lee and Aitchison (2009) and Kamler and Thomson (2008) warn that while many of these books stress the importance of writing well, they tend to be too prescriptive and do not take writers’ changing identities and needs into account. Lee (2010) believes that it is developmental to talk about your research and about your writing. Talking can clarify what you mean and what you do. The flaws that you have become blind to, will be pointed out by others. Aitchison (2010) regards the process of discussion and feedback as vital to developing writing. A writing group (or writers’ circle) provides a safe rehearsal space where students can use their peers to bounce off their ideas before submitting their work to their supervisors. Many of the students who join writing groups are international students (Chihota & Thesen 2014).

In my experience, I was given the opportunity to introduce my research to other postgraduate students in a five-minute presentation. I had to explain my research and answer questions. I was also asked to explain my research to various groups of post-graduate students and to describe how, as a mature student, I experienced my return to academia. I also explained my methodology at workshops. This meant that

CHAPTER 13 • WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

I joined the “ongoing conversation” in my disciplinary community (Paré 2010:34) and the experience was of inestimable value.

I regarded discovering the “self as author” stage of my writing identity as an epiphany. I first encountered it when I managed to view my research through the lens of the conceptual framework that I had chosen. I realised that the choice of framework was a challenge, yet I had an inkling that it would provide the necessary theory to explain my research. I agonised for weeks as the way in which the theoretical framework could be used in the context of my research remained elusive. I tried to verbalise my ideas to a colleague and fellow student, drawing a visual representation of how I thought it could work, when I suddenly realised I “got it”, confirming Lee’s (2010) contention that to talk about your research can be helpful. It was a eureka moment as I saw the mist clear for a fleeting moment – before it covered the summit once again. However, I grasped the theoretical application at last and where there is understanding, the writing can go on.

This epiphany was not a singular event, but also occurred after the third or fourth re-writes of my literature review. I had just read something that suddenly made sense to me, and I realised that nothing that I had written up to then would ever satisfy me in that chapter. It meant that I had to start over and rewrite the chapter, discarding months of work and piles of resources, and missing my deadline to hand in so that I could graduate that year. However, it was a worthwhile sacrifice. I suddenly found that, at last, I was in charge: occupying the subject position in my writing in an authoritative way. I had found my voice and discovered my “self as author”. This surge of confidence continued into the writing of my final chapter. It was the easiest chapter to write because it was as though I finally understood what I was writing about. The mist had lifted and the path to the summit was suddenly clear. Everybody deserves that epiphanal moment as a reward for sticking to the arduous task of writing a thesis or dissertation to the bitter end.

My “self as author” also manifested itself fully in my methodology chapter. I had the satisfaction of working with a methodology that suited who I was; my autobiographical and discoursal identity. This good fit gave me the confidence not only to explain a complicated methodology to the potential readers of my dissertation, but to describe and analyse my data with relative ease. My authorial self helped me to fit the various pieces of the jigsaw into the complex whole. I realised that I had discovered my scholarly self.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Aitchison *et al* (2012:438) asked a group of doctoral students and their supervisors to describe how they experienced the writing part of their doctoral candidature. Both groups spoke in extremes, of the “joys and pleasure” or of the “pain and frustration” of writing. No one found it easy, even when they found it stimulating or rewarding. These findings mirror my experience. For me, there is no doubt that doctoral writing is “emotional work”.

Thinking about identity and writing can be of use, even have a liberating effect on us as we write, as well as helping us to write in an institutional context. This comes about through thinking about why we write the way we do and understanding why we make the choices we do. Ivanič (1998) believes that critically reflecting on your own experiences as you write your thesis or dissertation makes a researcher out of you.

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CHAPTER 13 • WHOSE VOICE IS RIGHT WHEN I WRITE? IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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